

“The True and the False Church”

From John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Book IV, 2.4-5, 9-10; 4.10, English updated and emphasis added.

The false church described

4. In this way the Romanists assail us in the present day, and terrify the unskillful with the name of Church while they are the deadly adversaries of Christ. Therefore, although they exhibit a temple, a priesthood, and other similar masks, the empty glare by which they dazzle the eyes of the simple should not move us in the least to admit that there is a Church where the word of God does not appear. The Lord furnished us with an unailing test when He said, “Everyone that is of the truth hears My voice” (John 18:37). Again, “I am the good shepherd and know My sheep, and am known of Mine.” “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.” A little before He had said, when the shepherd “puts forth his own sheep, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him; for they know his voice. And a stranger they will not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers” (John 10:14, 4, 5).

Why then do we of our own accord, form so infatuated an estimate of the Church, since Christ has designated it by a sign in which is nothing in the least degree equivocal, a sign which is everywhere seen, the existence of which infallibly proves the existence of the Church, while its absence proves the absence of everything that properly bears the name of Church?

Paul declares that the Church is not founded either upon the judgments of men or the priesthood, but upon the doctrine of the Apostles and Prophets (Ephesians 2:20). No, Jerusalem is to be distinguished from Babylon, the Church of Christ from a conspiracy of Satan, by the discriminating test which our Savior has applied to them, “He who is of God, hears God’s words: you therefore do not hear them, because you are not of God” (John 8:47). In short, **since the Church is the kingdom of Christ, and He reigns only by His word, can there be any doubt as to the falsehood of those statements by which the kingdom of Christ is represented without His scepter, in other words, without His sacred word?**

True Christians, if they are faithful, are forced to separate from apostasy and are often cast out of corrupt churches.

5. As to their [the Catholic church’s] charge of heresy and schism, because we preach a different doctrine, and do not submit to their laws, and meet apart from them for Prayer, Baptism, the administration of the Supper, and other sacred rites, it is indeed a very serious accusation, but one which needs not a long and labored defense.

The name of heretics and schismatics is applied to those who, by dissenting from the Church, destroy its communion. This communion is held together by two chains — namely, consent in sound doctrine and brotherly charity [love, goodwill]. Hence the distinction which Augustine makes between heretics and schismatics is, that the former corrupt the purity of the faith by false dogmas, whereas the latter sometimes, even while holding the same faith, break the bond of union (Augustine, *Quaestiones in evangelium Matthaei*). But the thing to be observed is, that this union of charity so depends on unity of faith [belief], as to have in it its beginning, its end, in short, its only rule.

Let us therefore remember, that whenever ecclesiastical [church] unity is commended to us, the thing required is, that while our minds consent in Christ, our wills also be united together by mutual good-will in Christ. Accordingly Paul, when he exhorts us to it, takes for his fundamental principle that there is “one God, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4:5). No, when he tells us to be “of one accord, of one mind,” he immediately adds, **“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:2, 5); intimating, that where the word of the Lord is not, it is not a union of believers, but a faction of the ungodly.**

6. . . . Accordingly, he [Cyprian] declares that when heresies and schisms arise, it is because men do not return to the origin of the truth, because they do not seek the head, because they do not keep the doctrine of the heavenly Master. Let them now go and clamor against us as heretics for having withdrawn from their Church, since the only cause of our estrangement is, that they cannot tolerate a pure profession of the truth. I say nothing of their having expelled us by anathemas and curses.

The fact is more than sufficient to excuse us, unless they would also make schismatics of the apostles, with whom we have a common cause. Christ, I say, forewarned His apostles, “they shall put you out of the synagogues” (John 16:2). The synagogues of which He speaks were then held to be lawful churches. Seeing then it is certain that we were cast out, and we are prepared to show that this was done for the name of Christ, the cause should first be ascertained before any decision is given either for or against us. This, however, if they choose, I am willing to leave to them; to me it is enough that we were required to withdraw from them in order to draw near to Christ.

9. Now then let the Papists, in order to extenuate their vices as much as possible, deny, if they can, that the state of religion is as much vitiated and corrupted with them as it was in the kingdom of Israel under Jeroboam. They have a grosser idolatry, and in doctrine are not one bit more pure; rather, perhaps, they are even still more impure. God, no, even those possessed of a moderate degree of judgment, will bear me witness, and the thing itself is too manifest to require me to enlarge upon it. When they would force us to the communion of their Church, they make two demands on us — first, that we join in their prayers, their sacrifices, and all their ceremonies; and, secondly, that whatever honor, power, and jurisdiction, Christ has given to His Church, the same we must attribute to theirs.

In regard to the first, I admit that all the prophets who were at Jerusalem, when matters there were very corrupt, neither sacrificed apart nor held separate meetings for prayer. For they had the command of God, which enjoined them to meet in the temple of Solomon, and they knew that the Levitical priests, whom the Lord had appointed over sacred matters, and who were not yet discarded, how unworthy soever they might be of that honor, were still entitled to hold it (Exodus 29:9). But the principal point in the whole question is, that they were not compelled to any superstitious worship, no, they undertook nothing but what had been instituted by God. But in these men, I mean the Papists, where is the resemblance?

Scarcely can we hold any meeting with them without polluting ourselves with open idolatry. Their principal bond of communion is undoubtedly in the Mass, which we abominate as the greatest sacrilege. Whether this is justly or rashly done will be elsewhere seen (see chap. 18.; see also Book 2., chap. 15., sec. 6). It is now sufficient to show that our case is different from that of **the prophets**, who, when they were present at the sacred rites of the ungodly, **were not obliged to witness or use any ceremonies except those which were instituted by God.**

But if we would have an example in all respects similar, let us take one from the kingdom of Israel. Under the ordinance of Jeroboam, circumcision remained, sacrifices were offered, the law was deemed holy, and the God whom they had received from their fathers was worshipped; but **in consequence of invented and forbidden modes of worship, everything which was done there God disapproved and condemned. Show me one prophet or pious man who once worshipped or offered sacrifice in Bethel. They knew that they could not do it without defiling themselves with some kind of sacrilege.** We hold, therefore, that the communion of the Church ought not to be carried so far by the godly as to lay them under a necessity of following it when it has degenerated to profane and polluted rites.

10. With regard to the second point, our objections are still stronger. For when the Church is considered in that particular point of view as the Church, whose judgment we are bound to revere, whose authority acknowledge, whose admonitions obey, whose censures dread, whose communion religiously cultivate in every respect, **we cannot concede that they have a Church, without obliging ourselves to subjection and obedience.**

Still we are willing to concede what the Prophets conceded to the Jews and Israelites of their day, when with them matters were in a similar, or even in a better condition. For we see how they uniformly exclaim against their meetings as profane conventicles [religious meetings], to which it is not more lawful for them to assent than to abjure God (Isaiah 1:14). And certainly if those were churches, it follows, that Elijah, Micaiah, and others in Israel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, and those of like character in Judah, whom the prophets, priests, and people of their day, hated and execrated more than the uncircumcised [pagans], were aliens from the Church of God. **If those were churches, then the Church was no longer the pillar of the truth, but the stay of falsehood, not the tabernacle of the living God, but a receptacle of idols.**

They were, therefore, under the necessity of refusing consent to their meetings, since consent was nothing else than impious conspiracy against God. For this same reason, should anyone acknowledge those meetings of the present day, which are contaminated by idolatry, superstition, and impious doctrine, as churches, full communion with which a Christian must maintain so far as to agree with them even in doctrine, he will greatly err. For if they are churches, the power of the keys belongs to them, whereas the keys are inseparably connected with the word which they have put to flight. Again, if they are churches, they can claim the promise of Christ, "Whatsoever ye bind," etc.; whereas, on the contrary, **they discard from their communion all who sincerely profess themselves the servants of Christ.** Therefore, either the promise of Christ is vain, or in this respect, at least they are not churches.

In short, instead of the ministry of the word, they have schools of impiety, and sinks of all kinds of error. Therefore, in this point of view, they either are not churches or no badge will remain by which the lawful meetings of the faithful can be distinguished from the meetings of Turks [the followers of Mohammed].

The spiritual tyranny of false Christianity and manmade religion

10. . . . [The spiritual tyrants] will have our faith to stand and fall at their pleasure, so that whatever they have determined on either side must be firmly seated in our minds; what they approve must be approved by us without any doubt; what they condemn we also must hold to be justly condemned. Meanwhile, at their own caprice, and in contempt of

the word of God, they coin doctrines to which they in this way demand our assent, declaring that no man can be a Christian unless he assent to all their dogmas, affirmative as well as negative, if not with explicit, yet with implicit faith, because it belongs to the Church to frame new articles of faith.

13 **Here then is the difference.** They [the false religionists] place the authority of the Church without [separate from , above] the word of God; we annex it to the word, and do not allow it to be separated from it.

And is it strange if the spouse and pupil of Christ is so subject to her Lord and master as to hang carefully and constantly on His lips? In every well-ordered house the wife obeys the command of her husband, in every well-regulated school the doctrine of the master only is listened to. Wherefore, let not the Church be wise in herself, nor think anything of herself, but let her consider her wisdom terminated when He ceases to speak. In this way she will distrust all the inventions of her own reason; and when she leans on the word of God, will not waver in difference or hesitation, but rest in full assurance and unwavering constancy. Trusting to the liberal promises which she has received, she will have the means of nobly maintaining her faith, never doubting that the Holy Spirit is always present with her to be the perfect guide of her path.

At the same time, she will remember the use which God wishes to be derived from His Spirit. "When He, the Spirit of truth, is come, He will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). How? "He shall bring to your remembrance all things whatsoever I have said unto you." He declares, therefore, that nothing more is to be expected of His Spirit than to enlighten our minds to perceive the truth of His doctrine. Hence Chrysostom most shrewdly observes, "Many boast of the Holy Spirit, but with those who speak their own it is a false pretense. As Christ declared that He spoke not of Himself (John 12:50; 14:10), because He spoke according to the Law and the Prophets, so, if anything contrary to the Gospel is obtruded under the name of the Holy Spirit, let us not believe it. For as Christ is the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets, so is the Spirit the fulfillment of the Gospel" (Chrysostom, *Serm. de Sancto et Adorando Spiritu.*). Thus far Chrysostom.

We may now easily infer how erroneously our opponents act in vaunting of the Holy Spirit, for no other end than to give the credit of His name to strange doctrines, extraneous to the word of God, whereas He Himself desires to be inseparably connected with the word of God; and Christ declares the same thing of Him, when He promises Him to the Church. And so indeed it is.

The Biblical regulative principle—Scripture alone:

Do not add to nor subtract from God's revealed, written Word.

The soberness which our Lord once prescribed to His Church, He wishes to be perpetually observed. He forbade that anything should be added to His word, and that anything should be taken from it.

This is the inviolable decree of God and the Holy Spirit, a decree which our opponents endeavor to annul when they pretend that the Church is guided by the Spirit without [apart from] the word.